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ABSTRACT

Community colleges, in a quest for increased enrollments and expanded educational access, seem less concerned with quality than they were 15 years ago. This is evidenced by the move toward open enrollments, reduced academic requirements, promotion of sporadic course-taking patterns, and vocational, as opposed to general, education. Adjustments have been made to accommodate student preference for video instructional modes, to compensate for the deterioration of the secondary curriculum, and to give acceptable grades. While many factors are beyond the college's authority, standards, requirements, and grades are all within the college's control. Colleges have a responsibility to examine the effects of curricular shifts to pre-college-level course work, of allowing the level of transfer courses to deteriorate, and of promoting intermittent rather than sequential curricular structures and student attendance patterns. Data is available to help colleges focus on the effects of these kinds of policy decisions and to enable them to answer those who question whether these decisions are in the best interest of the community. An additional responsibility of the college is the promotion and maintenance of the liberal arts, not only within transfer programs, but also within vocational programs, and even as the basis for a liberal arts career major. The next decade will bring many changes and an increased demand for accountability that will force colleges to pay more attention to the business of education. (AYC)

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SEARCHING FOR QUALITY

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Speech to faculty and staff, Community College of Denver, August 24, 1981

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SEARCHING FOR QUALITY

Arthur M. Cohen

Quality is the theme of your meeting this year. And well it should be. What is a college without quality? The search for quality pervades all our activities.

Dr. Groth mentioned that I am the director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges. We search constantly for quality documents because we want to enhance the level of discourse about the community colleges of this nation. We interact with the people who send in documents, telling them when we accept them, telling them why we reject them, telling them how they might upgrade their paper so that it would be acceptable for inclusion in the ERIC system.

I am also the president of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, a research organization. By applying the methodologies best suited to the pattern of studies that we conduct, the Center staff maintains quality in its designs, analyses, and reports. Not incidentally we at the Center are also advocates for the liberal arts, the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. We believe that a community college without exemplars of these disciplines cannot maintain its own quality and is indeed doing a disservice to the people it is supposed to be serving. The liberal arts are not elitist; quite the contrary, an elite group does a disservice to the underprivileged if it shunts them to an educational track that holds them away from the liberal arts and the higher learning.

Do the community colleges maintain quality education? Naturally that is a matter for interpretation. There is no absolute standard of quality, there are only points on a continuum from the meretricious to the highest ideals. But we all search for quality in our work. When we stop doing that we have effectively dropped our charge as educators.

Some commentators have written that the community colleges are less concerned with quality than they were 15 or 20 years ago. I myself have raised that charge as I have watched the leaders clamor for growth as though that were the primary criterion on which their institution should be judged. I have also been dismayed at the tactics that have brought a flood of people into the institution but which have also appeared to exhibit disregard for the form, extent, and content of the learning toward which these people were directed.

Not to belabor the point but the leaders were given to believe that greater numbers meant a better institution. When the post-World War II crop of babies reached college age in the late 1950s, the universities could not accommodate all of them. Community colleges were opened at the rate of one a week to handle the overflow. And many of the leaders were fond of saying, "Look how good we are. Look at the people rushing to enter." They conveniently neglected the forces of demography that were really giving rise to the greatly increased enrollments.

Quality issues are even more pointed however when we consider the expansion of community colleges in another way. Higher education in America began with colleges designed for the sons of wealthy, professional, or at least well-connected families. The first group to benefit from expansion in access was women. For 150 years it has been immoral to bar women from going to college. When the state universities opened, the children of the poor began increasingly to go to college and the notion arose that it was immoral to bar people from further schooling just because they were from families with little money. The next group to benefit from reduced barriers were the ethnic minorities. It not only became immoral to bar people from college because of their ethnicity but deliberate steps were taken to encourage and recruit members of this group to attend. The most recent group to enter college in full force has been the ignorant. It sounds strange now but it has become immoral to bar a student from postsecondary education merely because that person is not well prepared because of poor prior school activities, who has a disastrous record in prior school attendance, or who is just plain stupid. There was a time when these

types of people were sent away and told to find some other way of occupying themselves. Now the colleges reach out for them and build all sorts of compensatory education activities to try to remedy their defects.

In the mid-1960s a few radical critics of education and a few students who fancied themselves as avant-garde thinkers said, "You have no authority to tell me what to study." Challenging the higher education establishment they demanded the right to take courses of their choice, attend at their own convenience, use the institution for their own purposes. Their pleas were granted and requirements were reduced. Blackburn and others in the monograph Changing Practices in Undergraduate Education detailed the reduction in academic requirements between 1967 and 1974 and found that according to the statements in college catalogs the proportion of general education requirements dropped notably. Although the reduction in two-year colleges was not as severe as that in four-year colleges it still was marked. The percentage of public two-year colleges requiring English composition dropped from 95 to 87; the percentage requiring two years of foreign language dropped from 16 to 8; the percentage requiring mathematics dropped from 29 to 18; and the percentage requiring physical education dropped from 82 to 76. The percentage of students completing associate degrees dropped as well so that by 1980 only around 10 percent of the entering students were completing any program--certificate or degree.

The colleges actually encouraged this reduction in requirements by advertising something for everyone, a quick study, a course or two for the casual student. And their procedures of enrolling people with minimal advance notice, allowing withdrawal from a course at any time until the last week without penalty, and offering courses off-campus in places and at times convenient for the students all contributed to the lack of sequence. Recent studies done at the Center for the Study of Community Colleges suggest that only one or two percent of the students follow curriculums in the sequence recommended in the catalogs.

Another phenomenon of the 1970's is that the purpose of postsecondary education became inverted. In an earlier generation, the person who wanted to go to work apprenticed to a tradesman or took a entry-level job in a business. The one who wanted to study the liberal arts went to college. That pattern has been completely turned around and now those who want to go to work go to school and expect--demand--that the school prepare them to earn a living, teach them a trade, or get them a job. And those who want to study the liberal arts may likely be found participating in courses in university extension divisions, or frequenting the bookstores, record shops, libraries, concerts, and other events available to them in the broader community. As a student recently said to me, "Why would anyone go to college just to learn?"

The colleges have made other adjustments to the students, prospective students, and what one commentator has called recently, "attendees." Beginning in the mid-1960s instructors began facing the first generation of students reared from infancy on television. That is, here were students from homes in which there was little or no print, from homes in which the television set was their constant companion. Many studies have been done, none conclusively, on the effect that this constant video massage has had on people's proclivities for reading. But any instructor who has been in the business longer than 15 years can tell the difference. Furthermore, the educators attempted to capitalize on that mode of information reception and created sizable numbers of televised courses, portions of courses presented on TV, experiments with television, and open- and closed-circuit broadcasts of all types. The much heralded cost saving that would be realized by replacing live instructors with television broadcasts never came about. The rationale heard now is

more to the effect that students are used to television, therefore they should get more of it.

One of the more notable effects on this generation of college students is that the curriculum in the secondary schools has deteriorated. Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation has documented this trend (we in educational research have a history of proving what school practitioners already know). In general, the four years of English required for high school graduation became three; the years of science became history became two; two years of mathematics became one; two years of science became one; two years of foreign language became none. You cannot take that much out of a curriculum without its having a effect on what people learn. If you have any faith that if people study something they are more likely to learn it than if they don't study it, you cannot drop 20 to 25 percent out of the secondary school curriculum and expect people to come to the community college as well prepared as though who came through in an earlier time.

I was pleased to see Dr. McLemore present the grade distribution report. It must have brought home to you something that has become quite apparent to any student of the community college. The grade distribution pattern has taken on a completely different shape in the past 15 years. In the mid-1960s the ideal toward which most colleges were striving was a distribution of grades in all courses that yielded ten percent A's, 20 percent B's, 40 percent C's, 20 D's, and 10 percent F's. Now your grade distribution here approximates 35 percent A's, 25 percent B's, 10 percent C's, practically no D's, and all the rest no credit, withdrawn, or no report. From an inverted U-shape the pattern has taken on the form of a reverse J. Much of the well publicized issue of grade inflation is apparent. By dropping the D's and F's, and raising the percentage of A's and B's you have totally changed the grade distribution pattern. Not incidentally, this is very similar to what has happened in most community colleges.

The grade distribution curve is important because it is one of the variables that is within our control to effect. You cannot change students' pattern of television watching. You cannot change the reasons why they think they want to come to school. However you can effect changes in the courses they take, the sequences in which they take them, the requirements within the courses, and the grades that you distribute. The secondary schools made some notable changes in recent years when they shrank the academic requirements and increased the options for students to take ceramics or photography workshops, shop classes, and work experience instead of school during their twelfth year. We in the community colleges have also changed and we can change again. Standards, demands, expectations, requirements, grades--all are within our control. We can create the kind of school we want. We do not have to continue allowing students to drop in and out of the institution haphazardly unless we want to. We do not have to continue awarding grades in a fashion that 60 percent of the students get A's and B's and none of them fail. These are decisions that can be made consciously. Better we would at least be aware of what we are doing.

The poorly-prepared students have themselves had an effect on the curriculum. Because the community colleges receive a high proportion of the less academic, two out of five English classes that are taught are at the level of remedial reading and remedial composition, sometimes called basic skills. Furthermore, one out of three mathematics classes is taught at a level less than algebra. Every third student studying mathematics in the community colleges of this country is studying arithmetic. These figures are drawn from national studies of curriculum and instruction that have been conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in recent years.

Less well documented is the deterioration within courses that are ostensibly college transfer. I had occasion to go back through some of the early literature about community college this past year and I reread a 1924 book called The Junior College which includes much data about the institutions of that era. Leonard Koos,

author of the book, recounted patterns of curriculum and instruction and one set of data that he reported caught my eye. He listed the number of pages that students were required to read in the literature classes taught in the secondary schools in 1922. His figure was 1750 pages per semester. Our own studies had shown that students in the literature classes in community colleges in 1977 were required to read 565 pages. One-third as much reading expected in the community college classes of 1977 as in the secondary school classes 55 years earlier. There may be all good reason for reducing the reading requirements but you should at least be aware of what you have done.

I am not an advocate for some elusive ideal called college level. But I do try to understand the expectations we have for our students, the demands we place on them. The term college level is variant; it fluctuates but it can be assessed. One of the ways of assessing it is simply to ask the instructors about their course requirements, grading standards, the texts that they use, the number of pages that students are required to read, the number and length of the papers they are expected to write. The term college level then would apply to the mean of all of these requirements across all courses of that type taught in all colleges. The term college level relates to content as that content leads students to increase literacy, to realization of past and present time, to questions of morality, ethics, reflection, to the higher learning. This is not to say that courses in the career programs are less "college level" than courses in the liberal arts. A course in nursing may be every bit as demanding as a course in history. Merely looking at the course title and catalog description tells you little of what the instructor expects. The theme of your meeting is quality. If you want quality, demand more.

We recently did a study in the Los Angeles Community College District asking students and faculty about course requirements and expectations. We asked the students how important it was that they be able to do certain tasks in the class in

which they were enrolled: understand the text, read new material, write papers, study for certain numbers of hours per week. We asked them also how confident they were in their ability to do those tasks. And then we asked if they had ever used any of the college's support services, the tutorials, counseling services, reading laboratory, mathematics laboratory, instructional service center. Of those students who had said they were not confident in their ability to do what was important for them to do in their class, less than one in four had been to the math lab, the learning resource center, the tutorial center. Why? They didn't have time. They heard it wasn't any good. No one asked them to go. They didn't even know there was such a service available. Do you want quality? Demand that your students use the services that are available to them. Left to their own volition the students tend not to take advantage of the elaborate mechanisms that you have devised to assist them. As faculty members you should effect liaison with the support staff, the counselors, learning laboratory directors, and so on, and work out arrangements with them. Tell them of the students you are sending to them and ask for reports back as to when they were there and what they did. Tell them what you want your students to study and ask them for help in finding materials. That type of interaction is rare but it can be very effective.

Quality relates also to the form of the entire curriculm. The career programs which dominate at CCD are among the most successful curriculums here. They are the most successful curriculums across the nation. They enroll about 40 percent of the students but they account for 55 percent of the graduates. And since 1975 more students have transferred to senior institutions from the career programs than from the so-called transfer program. Many reasons may be given to account for this phenomenon but to me the main reason is that the career programsare operated like curriculums. They have selective entry, mandated course requirements, a fixed sequence in which students must take courses, students who know that they are enrolled in a career program and faculty who know that they are teaching in one. The programs

have people who direct them, a head of nursing, a head of dental hygiene. And the faculty in those programs know where their students go when they graduate. Any nursing program head in any community college can tell how many of her students graduate, how much money they are earning, how many are working in the profession. The faculty do their own follow-up studies.

Contrast that with the liberal arts or transfer programs. The students take disparate courses. Few of them are enrolled in a program. The faculty work as individuals. There are more often department heads than program heads. Where do your students go when they leave your transfer courses? Few liberal arts instructors could answer. My point is that the career programs are the more successful because they operate linear curriculums, curriculums with fixed beginning and ending points. And the program operators know where their students are coming from, what they are getting while they are in the programs, and where they are going when they leave.

The staff members in a few community colleges have taken steps to impose that form of linearity on the transfer curriculums. Yesterday's Rocky Mountain News had an article about Miami-Dade Community College and Passaic Community College. Both have tried to rebuild the curriculum within their liberal arts, general education areas. They have sets of interdisciplinary general education courses that all students must take: one each in science, social science, humanities, and communications. They do placement testing at entry and steer students to their compensatory general education courses. They restrict admission to their specialized courses until after the students have participated in the interdisciplinary courses that are prerequisite to those specialized courses. They impose standards of academic progress which state that those students not making satisfactory progress toward a degree or certificate will be put on probation and eventually suspended. They have integrated the support services with the curriculum.

You can make decisions to effect the kind of institution you want. There are 30,000 people attending the Community College of Denver. As I heard this morning less than 1500 graduate. I might infer from that that more students here take only one course per term than any other number. That raises an interesting question: Which institution serves its district best? One with 30,000 students each taking one course; one with 15,000 students each taking two courses; or one with 7500 students each taking four courses. The costs are approximately the same because the FTE is the same. Which serves the district best?

One can make a case for any one of those institutional patterns. The point is that you should choose, and not let your institution drift haphazardly to take one or another form. You can effect the model that you want. If you want 30,000 students each taking one class, offer more courses off-campus, more options, more variety. Allow students to withdraw without penalty. Don't worry about probation. Don't enforce course prerequisites. By so doing you can convert your curriculum from linear to lateral form. You can offer a set of unconnected courses with students attending one, dropping out, and attending others that meet their fancy.

If you want to effect a more linear form, a more structured pattern of curriculum with students going through and completing degrees or certificates, you can do that too. Reverse your priorities. Offer fewer courses off-campus. Make more courses required. Do not allow students to withdraw without penalty at any time. Enforce prerequisites and probation standards. What's that you say? If you did that you'd lose many of your students? Perhaps so but those who remained would take more courses and would be more likely to complete their program. It is a matter of choice. Who thought 15 years ago when the community colleges went off-campus in force, when they began allowing withdrawal without penalty, when they stopped enforcing prerequisites and probation standards--who felt then that the result would be 30,000 students each taking one class?

If you choose to maintain your current pattern of service you should gather some additional information. You need to know about the 95 percent of the students who do not graduate. The data that Dr. McLemore recounted were drawn from samples of students who graduated and/or transferred. What about the part of the iceberg that is under the water? You might well try to find out. A group of research coordinators in 14 California community colleges did just that. They polled a two percent sample of the students who had registered and, using student assistants, performed telephone interviews. Everyone who registered was called periodically and asked, "Why did you register and not enroll? Why did you enroll and not show up for classes? Why did you appear for class and drop out after the second or third week? Why did you stay through the fourth week and then drop out prior to the end of the term?" These types of questions asked at intervals of all people who have registered yielded much information about why people attend, why they drop out, what they hoped to obtain from the institution, what they actually received. After analyzing their data the researchers found that students fall into many groups, one of which they labelled the "job connectors," those who attend the institution only long enough to find out where the jobs are. These are people who may be more or less skilled in a trade and who do not have the connections that enable them to get employment. By enrolling in a career program they are put in association with an instructor and numerous fellow students, many of whom may be already working. Should such people discover where jobs are they may well drop out within a few weeks and obtain employment. Has the community college failed them? Or has it provided them with exactly what they needed?

If your intention is to maintain the flat curricular profile and a graduation rate of around five percent I urge you to conduct continuing studies of the type that the California research directors did. You know enough about what has happened to the five percent of your students who graduated. You need to know something about

the other 95 percent. Unfortunately few community college spokespersons have good data on which to base assertions about that 95 percent. Most rely instead on anecdotal data, on stories about the 80-year-old great-grandmother who dropped out of college in 1920 and has come back and finished an associate degree, stories about the barefoot illiterate who took a few classes at the community college and is now president of one of the biggest corporations in Colorado. Those types of stories make for interesting reading in the Rocky Mountain News but there is always a cynical legislator or two who is not impressed.

But man does not live by career programs alone. We at the Center for the Study of Community Colleges are continuing our work on the liberal arts. We are researchers and advocates and both our research and our advocacy leads us to believe that the liberal arts are too important to be identified exclusively with the transfer courses. For the liberal arts to survive in the community colleges they must be expanded beyond the traditional courses designed originally for people who had the leisure to pursue their personal interests or who had a commitment to the scholarly life. The liberal arts have a place in the career programs and they can themselves serve as the basis for a career option.

To expand that latter point, we all recognize that this is an era in which most people attend college in order to learn to earn a living. True for all of higher education, it is doubly so in the community colleges. The liberal arts advocates can do much better than to deplore that tendency. They can justify a carefully designed program in the liberal arts for people who want to work in businesses that train their own specialists or in businesses where little specialized training is required. I speak here of the travel agencies, florist shops, sales offices, department stores, and all the state, county, and municipal governmental offices. Such employers would welcome entry-level applicants who are literate, who know how to get along with their supervisors and fellow employees, who have some perspective on their environment, who understand their heritage and the world around them, who can apply

critical thinking to immediate problems, who can weigh options and select alternatives--just the outcomes that the devotees of the liberal arts have been claiming.

How might such a liberal arts career major be structured? Just like a career program. It should have special admissions, a mandated curriculum sequence, especially designed support services, special events for the students enrolled. The faculty would consult together about the program. There would be a program head. And there would be a cooperative work experience component for that program with students doing a term in the types of offices and agencies in which they intend working. Curiously such a program would not be new; when the junior colleges were organized originally, the liberal arts career options programs were called terminal general education. Not that such programs now would necessarily be terminal--students could always opt for transfer to a baccalaureate institution at some time. The point is that the liberal arts need an injection of purpose. They need the type of strengthening that a distinctive program can give them.

I opened my remarks by recounting some of the phenomena of the past 15 years that have led the community colleges to their current status. Let me close by pointing to some expectations for the next decade or so.

There will be less money available for students, less incentive for students to attend school for the financial aids. The National Direct Student Loans and the CETA programs have been attacked by the current administration. For the immediate future the funds will be less freely available to students.

There will be more competition from the universities for your certificate programs. Many of the high-level technologies now taught in the community colleges--the associate degree nursing, dental hygiene, and others in the allied health fields especially--will be co-opted by the baccalaureate-degree-granting institutions. These will be replaced by license practical in nursing, dental assisting, and other types of support areas. The history

of higher education shows that this is the way programs have evolved as the occupational groups for which they prepare people drive for the higher professional status that depends in some measure on a longer degree of training for their practitioners.

There will be a greater demand for literacy on the part of employers. They will refuse to consider people who have left the schools without being able to read, write, or compute. The high school diploma has already lost all its credibility in America. If the community colleges do not strengthen their demands for literacy on the part of their graduates, the associate degree will suffer commensurately.

There will be more contract programs with industry, programs in which the community colleges contract to train employees with the businesses sharing the costs.

The community colleges will engage in more sophisticated marketing. This will be marketing in the best sense of the term, not mere institutional promotion. This type of marketing will depend in large measure on information about what happens to people at the colleges, what demands are made of them, what they get in return.

There will be more screening of students into the transfer courses. The drop-in and drop-out pattern has about reached the limit of its possibilities lest the community colleges take a form like the university extension divisions which offer no degrees. The Miami-Dade experience may be a model for the 1980s.

There will be a higher ratio of full-time instructors, an eventuality brought about by the stronger faculty associations and negotiated contracts.

You will have a higher percent of students taking two or more courses, more shaping of the curriculum in the direction of leading students to certificates and degrees. This will rest on fewer curricular options,

more structured programs.

You may see fewer students. The women, aged, and ethnic minorities have already been tapped.

The greatest source of so-called new students for community colleges in the 1980s will be the high school seniors. The more enlightened community college leaders now are reaching into the secondary schools and picking up the 12th graders that the high schools have effectually abandoned. If the secondary schools cannot revitalize their academic programs, the better students will seek advanced placement at the community colleges.

The trend toward larger units will continue with multi-campus colleges becoming more widespread. Statewide systems including universities and community colleges will also become more prominent, all justified on the grounds of efficiency and avoidance of program duplication.

The percentage of men faculty members will rise as fewer secondary school instructors make the move to community college teaching and as fewer women come into teaching. Because of the greater opportunities for women in the broader work world, it will be difficult to attract the brightest of them to teaching careers.

Last, the community colleges will be more like schools than like social welfare agencies and recreation centers. The people in them will realize that they are school people. They will be judged for doing things that schools do best. And if you're going to be judged as a school you might as well act like one. Thank you very much.

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